

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

JOHN W. COOK

Although bitterly opposed to slavery, Jesse W. Fell had not identified himself actively with the Abolition party. Unconsciously he was waiting for the evolution of a political party that should incorporate the slavery question in some of its multifarious aspects in its platform. Time was to give him his ample opportunity. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill so solidified the anti-slavery sentiment as to make the creation of the Republican party a logical necessity. As soon as it appeared he was one of its active adherents.

And now I am going to make a claim for Mr. Fell that I have not thus far come upon. I cannot resist the conviction that there originated with him an idea that made him an historic character and thus identified him personally and potentially with tremendous events that were world wide in their consequences. I do not claim for him the far vision that might have foreseen what followed from the forces that were set in motion. Short-sighted creatures of a day, we may, nevertheless, release energies that by the natural accumulation of inertia may precipitate catastrophies that rock a world, bury old wrongs in the ruins of the castles they have built for their own preservation, and thus make possible a new day of freedom for mankind.

Here are some statements whose correctness is amply verified by Hon Owen T. Reeves, Hon. A. E. Stevenson, and Hon. James S. Ewing.

On the twelfth day of September, 1854, Senator Stephen A. Douglas came to Bloomington to make a public address. He stopped at the old National Hotel, at the corner of Front and Main streets. Lawrence Weldon, then engaged at the practice of the law, at Clinton, came up to hear the speech and went with Mr. Ewing and Dr. Stevenson to call upon the senator. Shortly after, Mr. Lincoln, who had probably come up from Springfield for the same purpose, came in to pay his respects to the honored guest. After a brief conversation, Mr. Lincoln withdrew. Shortly after, Mr. Fell entered the room and was cordially greeted by Judge Douglas, for they were old acquaintances. The tide of conversation ran along in the usual way for a time, but Mr. Fell had an especial purpose to subserve. He therefore said to the Judge that there was much feeling over the question of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, and that many of Mr. Lincoln's friends would be greatly pleased to hear a joint discussion between himself and Mr. Lincoln on these new and vital questions that were so vitally interesting the people.

Judge Douglas seemed much annoyed and after hesitating a moment said: "No! I won't do it. I come to Chicago. I am met by an old-line Abolitionist; I come to the center of the state and am met by an Administration Democrat. I can't hold the Abolitionists responsible for what the Whigs say; I can't hold the Whigs responsible for what the Abolitionists say, and I can't hold either responsible for what the Democrats say. It looks like 'dogging' a man over the state. This is my meeting. The people came here to hear me and I want to talk to them." Mr. Fell said: "Well, Judge, perhaps you may be right; perhaps some other time it may be arranged." And so it was that Mr. Fell did not carry his point for that meeting.

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But Mr. Fell did not give up the idea of the joint discussion. It was his pertinacious following of the scheme that gave to the country that memorable series of illuminating addresses, unsurpassed in all the annals of debate in which the supreme question, the question of fate, in the forum of a nation, was held up to the reason and the consciences of men.

Who doubts for a moment the effect of those debates upon the destiny of Abraham Lincoln? It would be the most violent of assumptions to assert that he would have been nominated for the presidency of the Republican party in 1860 without the prominence they gave him. He took his logical place thereafter at the front of the champions of the anti-slavery movement, for he had proved himself more than equal to the most redoubtable protagonist of the pro slavery movement. I cannot resist the conclusion that this remarkable train of sequences logically followed Mr. Fell's resolute purpose as foreshadowed in the brief incident that I have related.

But again. After the first debate at Ottawa, Lincoln came to Bloomington for a conference with friends from all parts of the state. Judge Reeves is responsible for the statement that Mr. Fell was present at that conference, as we should fully expect. At the Ottawa meeting Judge Douglas had propounded to Mr. Lincoln a number of questions to be answered at Freeport. Mr. Lincoln told his friends what answers he should give to those questions, and he also told them he proposed to propound certain questions to Judge Douglas at that meeting. Among them was this one: "Can the people of a territory, in any legal way, against the consent of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from a territory prior to its admission as a state?"

The members of the conference saw clearly that if Judge Douglas should answer this question in the affirmative he would certainly be elected to the Senate, for there were many Republicans favorably disposed to him because of his opposition to the attitude of the administration. It was believed that he would so answer. Lincoln saw that, although such an answer would close his hope for the coveted senatorship, the South would never nominate so uncertain a candidate in 1860. In consequence, the conference therefore protested against the submission of such an interrogative and voted against it with a single exception. That exception, I need not say, was Mr. Fell. Did his stand in the premises account in any way for Lincoln's reply to the conference—"Judge Douglas may indeed defeat me for the Senate but he will at the same time defeat himself for the presidency in 1860, and that is a far greater issue."

Prophetic words! They were verified to the letter. Did Jesse Fell's support of Lincoln's plan fall into the casual series again? Who can answer? The logic, if so, is firmly knit—Mr. Fell's suggestion of the joint debate; the consequent nation-wide fame of Lincoln; the consequent nomination; the fatal question; the two Democratic candidates in 1860; the triumphant election of Lincoln; the abolition of slavery; the indissoluble reunion of the states; one flag! One common destiny!

Did this modest man ever allow himself to trace the conclusions of the successive syllogisms to the final conclusion? Dr. Edwards besought him to write a frank and free autobiography and he really began it but his modesty soon got the better of his resolution and he gave it up, declaring that he could not bring himself to the task. If he had only been willing to write a book of "Recollections" what revelations we might have had!

Normal, Illinois, June 5, 1916.

